

## 1. NANA HANNAH

Hannah Benjamin, my paternal grandmother, was a strong-willed and determined woman. She was uncompromising and resilient. She had to be: in the space of less than twenty-five years she married, bore eleven babies, lost two of them and was widowed with nine children and no money. Not a recipe for an easy life.

Yet Nana Hannah had much to be proud of. At the time she died in October 2003, Hannah Benjamin had spawned a dynasty of nine children, nineteen grandchildren and twenty-eight great-grandchildren. The Benjamins are a warm, loving and community-minded family. All of Nana's children and grandchildren who have married have chosen Jewish spouses.

Despite being in awe of all Nana achieved in her lifetime, I would never wish to have lived her life. I doubt I would have survived! I distinctly remember one of my aunties' comments on the day of Nana's funeral: 'They don't make them like that anymore.' It's true. Nana was incredibly tough.

Nana and I are only two generations apart. Yet between Indian-Jewish grandmother and Australian-Jewish granddaughter is a huge chasm in values and attitudes. Nana faced many difficult situations during her lifetime and she had a remarkable lack of choice as to how she led her life. Rather than expending energy in frustration, she accepted her lot with a shrug of her shoulders and the utterance of three words: 'What to do?'

Nana grew up and raised her children within the confines of the small Baghdadi Jewish community of Bombay. It was simply expected that she would marry and have children. Once she had

children, there was no question about which school she would send them to. The Jacob Sassoon Free High School, with its free tuition, Jewish education and hot lunches for the students, was the obvious choice. Nana didn't have the dilemma of work/life balance facing mothers today. She simply never worked outside the home and devoted her life to raising her children and looking after her family.

Nana was only forty-three years old when her husband died in 1956. Despite still being young, the thought of remarriage simply wasn't within her realm of possibility. When I asked her whether she ever considered marrying again, Nana unhesitatingly replied, 'No.' And then added emphatically, 'Not at all.'

I can't imagine being widowed today as a forty-three-year-old woman and not even *considering* the possibility of marrying another man. I can't fathom how Nana raised so many children even with a husband, let alone without him. I sometimes wish I could emulate Nana's ability to accept the status quo without questioning it, ruminating over it and resenting it. Sadly, I am not nearly as hardy as my grandmother.



I only came to know the details of Nana's early life when I was in my mid-twenties. The Nana of my childhood was physically close but emotionally distant. Although I saw her regularly, she wasn't a particularly influential figure in my life. It wasn't that we didn't get along. But by the time I was born, Nana was sixty-two years old. Certainly young by today's standards. By then, however, Nana had raised nine children of her own and had fourteen grandchildren before me. I was grandchild number fifteen and even more were to follow.

It wasn't just the sheer number of grandchildren that made it hard to get close to Nana. It was also her nature. Nana, although kind and loving, was not a particularly affectionate woman. The

toughness that enabled her to get through the difficult times in her life translated into what I perceived – at least as child – to be a lack of warmth. I can barely recall any embrace we shared or time spent playing or simply chatting. Yet I saw Nana at least once a week during my entire childhood.

When I was growing up in the mid-1970s and '80s in the Sydney beachside suburb of Bondi, Nana lived only a ten-minute walk away from my family home. In fact, nearly all of my father's brothers and sisters and their families lived within a two-kilometre radius of our home. Every Saturday evening, all of Nana's children and all of her younger grandchildren – including me and my brother – would congregate at her apartment. I always looked forward to playing with my cousins, and my aunts and uncles were enticed by the promise of a Hannah Benjamin home-cooked Iraqi feast. These weekly family gatherings were filled with loud chatter, the sounds of children laughing and the aroma of spicy food.

We never ate dinner before going to Nana's house as she would always cook more than enough food for the twenty or so of us that would descend on her O'Brien Street home each week. Nana's apartment had two possible entries – a formal entry through the front door and another through the back door via the washing line and rubbish bins, which led straight to her kitchen. I don't remember anyone ever using the actual front door to get into Nana's apartment. We all entered straight through the kitchen, the smell of her cooking wafting through the concrete common area she shared with her neighbours.

Without fail, Nana fried up everyone's favourite snack – *aloomakalas* – each week. *Aloomakala* is a hybrid word: *aloo* means potato in Hindi and *makala* means fried in Arabic. Essentially they are potatoes which have been slowly deep fried in oil and they are delicious. Nana's stove and oven were positioned directly in front of the kitchen door and many of us would pinch an *aloomakala* as soon as we were inside the kitchen. Often, they had just been

removed from the boiling oil and were simply too hot to hold, so Nana would wrap them in paper towel. That didn't, however, stop me from burning my mouth as I impatiently took a bite before my *aloomakala* had cooled sufficiently.

Nobody makes *aloomakalas* these days (except maybe Auntie Florrie or Auntie Mabel on very special occasions) because they are loaded with oil and are not particularly healthy. But that wasn't a great concern to the Benjamins in the late 1970s and early '80s before they discovered a family predisposition to type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure.

Actually, none of Nana's food was the kind you would want to eat if you were watching your weight. I was never particularly interested in her other specialties: *coobas* (mince meat balls covered in semolina and rice flour), *beetroot coobas* (the same with a beetroot sauce), *hamim* (also known as *hameen*: a dish of baked chicken in rice traditionally prepared for *Shabbat* [Saturday] lunch due to its very slow cooking time) and *chittarney* (a dry curry with lots of onion and vinegar). But Hannah's children and their spouses loved them and would devour her Iraqi and Indian cooking, regardless of the calories it contained.

Nana always had at least one packet of Lebanese pita bread put aside for our weekly visit. The pita was easily substituted for the more desirable but less available Indian roti and was supposed to be an accompaniment for Nana's food. *Junglee* that I was (Hindi for someone without manners, respect, or in my family, an appreciation of good food), I used to tear the bread and eat it in large strips on its own, filling my stomach with not very nutritious fried potato and white bread. The only other piece of Nana's cooking that I ate was her delicious sliced cucumber marinated in vinegar, which she prepared in an unglamorous but reliable old Moccona coffee jar.

Although I don't recall it, Nana must have been a coffee drinker because she had another old Moccona coffee jar positioned at

child-friendly height on her buffet, filled with an assortment of lollies. There were Minties, sugar-coated spearmint leaves, fake candy bananas, chocolate freckles, milk bottles, and strawberries and creams. Yes, we loved going to Nana's each week!

Dinner was usually eaten with the TV – complete with massive spiral antenna on top – turned on in the background. The usual viewing schedule was *Young Talent Time*, *Mork and Mindy* and, in later years, *It's A Knockout*. The adults liked to play cards after dinner and 'Lucky 7' was a favourite. While they ate, the eight young cousins separated into two groups divided along gender lines: five girls and three boys. As far as I know, all the boys ever did was play cricket in the hallway, while the girls sang into the carpet sweeper (I don't think Nana even owned a vacuum cleaner).

On summer Saturday nights, all the cousins played cricket in the courtyard and tried to coax our parents into buying us ice-cream at the nearby Bondi Beach shops. We jumped up and down, pulled on the long washing line in Nana's courtyard and shouted, 'I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice-cream.' Our parents usually relented, if only to achieve some peace and quiet from eight screaming children.

Interestingly, aside from cooking, I'm not sure what Nana did during this time when her family descended on her home. I don't remember interacting much with her, other than being told off for causing chaos in her perfectly tidy house. 'Buss! So much mess y'all made?' she would shout at us in her uniquely Indian-English constructed sentence. What she meant was: 'Enough! What a mess all of you have made.' Having raised nine children of her own, she knew how to keep her grandchildren in line. We were never scared of her in the way that her own children had been (my father recalls being terrified of her when he was growing up), but I don't think any of us had a close bond with her either.

Nana certainly seemed happy to have the company of her

family and to have her home filled once more with laughter and chatter, but it seemed to me that she was relieved when we finally left each Saturday night and she could return her apartment to its usual state of peace and order.



Nana was really quite a character. She was well connected within the Sydney Baghdadi Jewish community and was always up to speed with the latest *hadoosh* (Arabic for ‘gossip’). She had copies of the latest *TV Week* and *New Idea* magazines stacked under her coffee table and knew all the celebrity news. She had a phenomenal memory and was always aware of what each of her children and grandchildren were doing from week to week.

Nana was obviously proud of her family, and photographs of her children and grandchildren hung all around her apartment. The wedding photos of my parents and my aunts and uncles were displayed on the walls above her couch, and on the buffet were photos of each one of her grandchildren: baby photos, school photos, graduation photos.

I always loved to look at Nana’s collection of photos when I visited her. One of my favourites was a black-and-white shot of Nana dancing with Uncle Benny at Uncle Sass’ wedding in 1969. Nana was so young that I could hardly recognise her.

At the time, it never seemed strange to me that among all these photos, Nana didn’t have even one of her late husband. It was only in hindsight that I noticed that she never talked about the man she had married and didn’t wear a wedding ring (I later discovered that it had become so worn out that she stopped wearing it.)

The first time I ever saw Nana’s wedding photo was in the same year that I got married, when I was already twenty-six years old. I think that may have been the first photo I had ever seen of my grandfather, Jacob Benjamin.

## 2. BAGHDADI BEGINNINGS

Jacob Benjamin died long before I was born. In fact, he did not live long enough to see any of his grandchildren. So although I sometimes refer to him as 'Papa' Jacob, I use the term 'Papa' out of respect; in my mind he is simply 'Jacob'. Although he was my father's father, he was a man I never knew and a man who was rarely spoken of while I was growing up.

The little I was told about my paternal grandfather included that he was a well-liked and well-respected member of Bombay's Baghdadi Jewish community. And that of his five sons, it is my father who is most like him in temperament and mannerisms: softly spoken, kind, calm and gentle.

When I started seeking more detailed knowledge about Jacob Benjamin, I noticed that no one had anything negative to say about him. Of course, he couldn't have been flawless. But I think the fact of his untimely death left him somewhat suspended in time; Jacob was only fifty-four years old when he died and most of his children hadn't yet reach adulthood. Even when he was alive, Jacob's children didn't get to spend much time with him as he was so busy working. Nevertheless, they all adored him and even today, Jacob's children affectionately refer to their father as 'Daddy'.

None of Jacob Benjamin's nine children had the benefit of watching their father grow old; they didn't have him by their side when they left India and immigrated to Australia. And so it seems that my father and his siblings, even though they now have children and grandchildren of their own, still hold on to that childlike quality of believing their father was infallible. If only Jacob Benjamin had

lived longer, they could have gained more insight into his strengths and weaknesses, and received his guidance on so many aspects of their own lives.



Jacob Benjamin was the eldest of five children and was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in December 1902. At the time, there was a substantial Jewish population in Baghdad.

Iraq came under British rule during World War I, and during the War, Jacob's father was conscripted into the British army. He was never heard from again, presumed killed at war. Having lost her husband, Jacob's mother Habiba feared for her eldest son's life; Jacob was at an age where he too could soon be conscripted into the British army.

So Habiba insisted that Jacob flee Baghdad for Bombay to escape army duties. It was 1917 when Habiba disguised Jacob, merely fifteen years old at the time, by dressing him as an Arab and sending him to Bombay with his uncles (Habiba's half-brothers). Ironically, Jacob's two uncles were younger than Jacob himself, so Jacob was responsible for looking after them!

The three young men travelled on donkeys through bandit-infested forests in order to catch a boat from the Iraqi port city of Basra to Bombay. Once in Bombay, the three men lived with Jacob's grandfather, *Chacham* Avraham Tahan (whom everyone knew as *Chacham* Avraham; *chacham* being the Hebrew word for wise man or scholar) and his wife.

Fifteen-year-old Jacob began working as a tram driver in Bombay in order to earn a living. His mother Habiba and his four siblings eventually followed Jacob to Bombay, but not until after the end of the War in 1918.

Jacob Benjamin with his mother and siblings weren't the first Iraqi Jews to leave Baghdad for Bombay. Almost a century earlier, in the 1820s and '30s, considerable numbers of Iraqi Jews had left

Iraq for India in order to avoid persecution. Indeed, by the time Jacob arrived in India, a well-established Iraqi Jewish community not only existed, but was prospering in Bombay.

When Jacob Benjamin arrived in Bombay in 1917, a five-year-old girl named Hannah Levi was also living there. Hannah's family were members of Bombay's Baghdadi Jewish community and her parents had also made the journey from Iraq to India. Years later, Hannah would become Jacob's bride.

### *Hannah Levi's Family*

Hannah's parents, Sassoon and Aziza Levi, were married in Baghdad, Iraq. Astonishingly, at the time they married, Aziza was only fourteen years old. Equally as remarkable, Aziza's husband Sassoon was almost twice her age and already had three children from his first wife, who had since died.

Sassoon and Aziza's marriage was an arranged one and I'm certain that Aziza didn't have any power to veto the choice of her husband-to-be. Although it was common practice at the time for Iraqi Jewish girls to be married off at such a young age, it is still shocking to me that my great-grandmother became a wife and stepmother when she was only a child herself.

Aziza must have been an extraordinary woman. I am told that she raised her three stepchildren as if they were her own, which must have been extremely challenging. This is especially so given Aziza and Sassoon's difficulties with their biological children: the couple had a staggering sixteen children together, but only four of them survived to reach adulthood. Aziza and Sassoon's babies – including two sets of twins – kept dying, one after another, until eventually Aziza, heartbroken, convinced her husband to move from Iraq to India in the hope that a new country would give them a fresh start. The fact that a Baghdadi Jewish community existed in Bombay undoubtedly influenced their decision to relocate there.

In Bombay, Aziza gave birth to a son and named him Hayeem,

derived from the Hebrew word for 'life'. He was their first surviving child and was followed by fraternal twin girls – Hannah and Sarah, and another son, Naji. Aziza then had another daughter, but she too died when she was only a year old.

Hannah Levi – better known to me as Nana Hannah – and her twin sister Sarah were born in Poona (now Pune), India, approximately 160 kilometres south of Bombay. Nana always maintained that her date of birth was 16 July 1912. However, Nana's birth date has been a source of debate and amusement within the Benjamin family.

The Nana Hannah/Aunty Sarah birthday controversy is this: Nana and Aunty Sarah were twins who paradoxically claimed – at least as adults – to have different birthdays. Nana celebrated her birthday every year on July 16. Yet Aunty Sarah insisted that she was born almost one year later, in May 1913. The two sisters even had different birthdates on their passports. Both as stubborn as each other, each sister was adamant that she was correct.

Of course, all Nana's very loyal children (who also know Nana's impeccable recollection of important dates) were convinced that Nana was correct and that Aunty Sarah simply didn't want to admit she was actually a year older than she claimed. Neither sister ever had a birth certificate to prove who was correct, and without official records, their birthday dispute raged for years.

I visited Aunty Sarah in London in 2001 and finally solved the mystery. Aunty Sarah admitted to me that when she immigrated to London from Bombay, she enrolled in an educational course and nominated a birth date of May 1913 so she could get into the course. Aunty Sarah has since conceded that Nana was correct regarding their date of birth.



Soon after Hannah and Sarah were born in July 1912, Sassoon and Aziza moved their family from Poona to the Bombay suburb of

Byculla. Sassoon and Aziza were observant Jews; they kept a kosher home (observed the Jewish dietary laws) and, without a kosher butcher shop in Bombay at the time, Aziza koshered her own meat which had been slaughtered according to Jewish law. Sassoon was a skilled *mohel* (a man qualified to circumcise Jewish baby boys) and he taught his children, including his twin daughters, to read Hebrew. Both Sassoon and Aziza regularly studied Torah, the five Books of Moses.

Despite their religious convictions, Aziza and Sassoon sent Hannah and Sarah to the Clare Road Convent School, a Catholic school in Bombay, due to its high standard of education. But the twins transferred to Bombay's only Jewish school in the Fourth Standard (equivalent to 7th Grade): the Jacob Sassoon Free School.

Hannah didn't like either the Catholic or the Jewish school much. Aged twelve, a resolute young Hannah decided that she no longer wanted to go to school. I have already described her as a very strong-minded and determined woman. Even at this young age Hannah knew exactly what she wanted. And it was that she didn't want to attend school. She preferred to stay home and help her mother cook. Hannah pleaded with her parents not to force her to go to school and eventually they agreed.

At home with her mother Aziza, Hannah learned to cook traditional Iraqi Jewish food. She became an exceptional cook and drew on her cooking skills constantly when she had a large family of her own, and in her later life when her children had left home.

As a teenager, Hannah received a number of marriage proposals. In the late 1920s in Bombay's Baghdadi Jewish community, most marriages were arranged by matchmakers. So in fact it was Hannah's mother Aziza who received the proposals and it was Aziza who decided who her daughter would marry. Had he been alive, Hannah's father would have received the marriage proposals, but Sassoon had died in 1928 when Hannah was only sixteen years old.

Aziza rejected all the early proposals because she considered Hannah too young to marry. Remembering Aziza had been only fourteen years old when she married, it speaks volumes that Aziza didn't want her daughter to become a child bride like she had been.

But in 1929, Aziza accepted a proposal for seventeen-year-old Hannah to marry a twenty-seven-year-old man named Jacob Benjamin – the same Jacob Benjamin who had been living in Bombay for over ten years, having fled Baghdad dressed as an Arab. Papa Jacob.